

A Few Observations from a Changeling

by Cheryl Foster

Former Truman/Marshall Scholar, Non-winner of Other Scholarships, Campus Faculty Representative, Member of Finalist Selection Committees, Member of Interview Panel to Select Truman and Marshall Scholars

Sitting on so many sides of a complex fence, I have come to learn a great deal about the benefits of encouraging students to apply for major national scholarships. Here are a few of the things I have discovered.

What students believe will impress a scholarship body is often the least likely thing to impress them given the generic nature of the experience. This error occurs most often, perhaps, among students at educational institutions where the options for experiences have not been as multifarious as those offered at elite private colleges. For example, being a White House Intern means little or nothing in itself (even now). Any and all student experiences are best filtered through serious reflection about why they have or have not been enlightening. Even students at elite universities have sometimes had little to say about concrete particulars that appear on their applications. Students must be discouraged from listing things to fill up space or because they “sound” impressive. There is always an interviewer who will know something about such elements of an application. Student superficiality in the face of questioning about these elements can quite literally kill an interview.

Portions of an application where a student has a chance to express his or her values in an essay must always be taken with the utmost seriousness. These should never read like a prosaic resume of achievements but rather ought to give a portrait of the student’s inner life and concerns as they manifest themselves in choices and commitments a student has made, or in his or her aspirations for the future. Obviously, not all facets of a student’s life can be crammed into the essay. The aim should be to make it cohesive, memorable and genuine.

Complementarity strikes me as being of particular importance here: the essay portions of an application should add to, amplify or enhance what appears on the “list” portion of an application – avoid mere repetition.

Often a student who wows us on paper will fall flat in an interview. Why does this happen? Some reasons might include a student thinking that he or she cannot be themselves because the personages on an interview panel are so grand – in such cases a student can be seen trying to act sophisticated or impressive. Faculty mentors can discourage such behavior by reassuring a student that he or she has been nominated for who they are; pretension rarely impresses. Another reason for interview meltdown might be a lack of careful listening to questions as asked and having a tendency to provide stock responses. Every interview panel in the world throws unexpected questions at a student to avoid this phenomenon but even so, students often try too hard to say impressive things rather than answer the questions from the well of their own thinking.

The most important thing? THINK THINK THINK! The best interviews flow like lava, not because the student gives egghead dissertations in response to each question but because an interview makes clear who lives a life where thinking is paramount and who does not. When a student’s actions and commitments flow from reflection, the student will not find it difficult to call up the fruits of those reflections when asked questions. Again, the faculty mentor can facilitate reflective thinking as a part of everyday life when helping the student prepare scholarship applications.

Students at large public or less competitive institutions have one particular disadvantage that will always be hard to remedy – the lack of a consistently-challenging peer group in their own college communities. This deficit often manifests itself in an obviously lower level of student eloquence in interviews, as well as in a lack of polish and in less quickness in thinking on his or her feet. It can also show up in more susceptibility to social intimidation at pre-interview receptions. If at all possible, faculty mentors should strive to provide student nominees with experiences that will balance the perceived vacuum of intellectual tone on campus. Honors courses, discussions with faculty and attendance at cultural events can provide student applicants with arenas in which to exercise the marriage of thinking, speaking and reflection, marriages that occur more naturally in prestigious, selective and competitive college environments.

Manners matter. This includes a variety of things. When a student has an interview, he or she is meeting a group of busy individuals who have nevertheless taken the time to spend a day with strangers. The student should make eye contact, acknowledge each person individually when the student is introduced (this doesn't always mean shaking hands but it can), and try to be relaxed enough to show how genuinely pleased he or she is to be there. Another aspect of manners: if there is a reception before the interview, a student should under no circumstances use the reception as a way to edge out the competition and monopolize a panel

member's attentions. Neither should a student attempt anything other than real conversation: using a social occasion to promote one's candidacy always shows for what it is – naked opportunism. If the panel member wants to know something specific about a student, they'll ask. Otherwise, a student should cut the networking and enjoy meeting some new people.

Finally: little grooming things matter. A student does not need to wear expensive clothing to an interview if he or she does not have access to such clothing, nor must a student change his or her personal style entirely for the sake of conformity. What dress and grooming ought to express is a respect for the honor conferred in being called to an interview. In other words, clean, neat clothing of some seriousness or formality is appropriate, but suits aren't always right if a student would feel entirely out of place in one. For men, a very nice jacket and good trousers are acceptable, with a tie or good turtleneck, if the latter is more in keeping with the person's own style. For women there is more flexibility but personal style should be somewhat more understated than it might be on a Friday night, yet not so very understated as to appear no different than on a day in the classroom. Skirts are not necessary! For all genders, obviously, clean hair, neatly styled (men don't have to cut it off but if it's long, tied back or combed back might be best); unobtrusive accessories and jewelry (though not necessarily dull!!); sit up straight and don't slouch in the chair, but there's also no need to sit at formal attention the whole time.

Humor helps!

Dr. Cheryl Foster is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rhode Island. Dr. Foster is a 1981 Truman Scholar and 1986 Marshall Scholar, and serves on the screening and selection committees for both the Truman and Marshall Scholarships. Dr. Foster also serves as the Scholarships Coordinator at the University of Rhode Island.